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Gordon Lavoy

Active sand dunes drift across the Desert Habitat Management Area.

A Land of Contrasts

by Mark Quinn

Tiny darting reptiles, spiny prickly pear cactus, white sand and blistering sun. The Sahara. The Mojave. Death Valley. These are the visions that the word "desert" conjures up in most of our minds. It certainly doesn't bring to mind lakes, streams, lush vegetation or trees. Yet there is a desert in the Columbia Basin that combines these diverse characteristics — the Washington Department of Game's Desert Habitat Management Area.

How its contrasting elements came to coexist is a matter of recent history. Before 1952 most of central Washington was characterized by endless stands of tall sagebrush and fleet black-tailed jackrabbits. The area had fertile soils and a long growing season. But it was dry. For many years farmers and ranchers had sought an economical way to bring irrigation water to the basin. Finally, some ambitious and dedicated businessmen and farmers came up with a plan to harness the Columbia River. They managed

to sell their plan to the state and federal governments, which agreed to guarantee funding for it.

The Columbia Basin Federal Reclamation Project became one of the largest and most innovative public works projects in modern history. Spearheaded by the Department of the Interior, its goal was to irrigate more than a million acres of basin farmland. A system of canals, siphons and tunnels diverted water from the Columbia at Grand Coulee Dam. Banks Lake, Potholes Reservoir and Billy Clapp Lake were created as huge storage basins for irrigation water.

Operating by gravity, the giant irrigation system today distributes water through some 2,000 miles of canals and extends from Grand Coulee Dam south 150 miles to Pasco. The project also includes a system of drainage channels and wasteways designed to carry excess irrigation water back to the river.

Despite all the engineering and surveying that went into the Columbia

Basin project, no one was absolutely sure what impact all this irrigation water would have on the Basin. As the project proceeded, it became apparent that drainage of irrigated lands would be one of its most unpredictable aspects. Not all of the excess water found its way to the drainage channels. Some drained underground and appeared as small ponds, streams and wetlands downslope from irrigated fields. These newly created wetlands became more prevalent as time passed.

The Desert HMA today extends for 21 miles between Potholes Reservoir and the town of George. It comprises 7,554 acres of Game Department-owned land and 20,144 acres which the Bureau of Reclamation owns and has turned over to the Game Department for management.

Before the Columbia Basin Federal Reclamation Project, this land had been a virtual desert. Vegetation was sparse



and low-growing. Sand dunes, at the mercy of the winds, slowly marched across the face of the land. Native wildlife consisted of such species as the side-blotched lizard, badger, bull snake and cottontail rabbit.

As irrigation developed in the Basin, two main drainage waterways emerged — the Winchester and Frenchman Hills wasteways, which meandered down their paths of least resistance to Potholes Reservoir. Their courses extended through what is now the heart of the Desert HMA.

The passage of so much water had a startling impact on the land. Small lakes, potholes and intermittent and perennial streams began to appear. Some of the dunes slowed their relentless marching as stabilizing vegetation found enough moisture to hold and nourish their root systems. Willows, cattails and bulrushes started to grow on the wetlands, and sedges, saltgrass and legumes took hold in peripheral areas, as the desert slowly retreated.

In the wet areas, new vegetation brought with it more diverse species of wildlife. Small birds and mammals quickly pioneered the developing ripa-

rian areas adjacent to the water course. Following the small birds and mammals were predators such as hawks and coyotes. A totally new ecosystem developed.

But the takeover was not complete. The higher dunes and other places that were unaffected by the newly arrived water remained as islands of the once-continuous desert landscape.

But as drastic as these changes have been, the Desert HMA is still going through a transition. The ultimate impact of all that water will probably not be apparent for many years. Studies show that many of the recently formed ponds and marshes on the Desert HMA are gradually filling in with vegetation. Aerial photographs taken in the early '60s show about 20 percent more surface water than exists there now, and recent photos reveal about 20 percent more riparian vegetation today than existed then.

Will there be any open water on the Desert HMA in 50 years? About the only thing we can say for sure is that the area is still in a state of rapid change.

Still, the Desert HMA remains one of the most diverse areas in the state. It pro-

vides a great variety of recreational opportunities, from fishing and canoeing to waterfowl and upland game bird hunting. To protect the HMA's unique environment, the Game Department has restricted vehicle access. But on foot or horseback, visitors can explore freely.

In the fall, hunters are drawn to the HMA by the thousands of ducks that flock to its wetlands and open water. Muskrats, beavers, coyotes and an occasional bobcat attract trappers. Year-around fishing lakes lure anglers after bass and trout. Other people come to canoe, hike, watch birds, photograph wildlife or just commune with nature.

The Desert HMA is unique. Majestic trumpeter swans cruise the ponds beside sand dunes inhabited by horned toads. Overhead, tight formations of lesser Canada geese rhythmically wing their way to the next stopover, while on the soft, warm sand a small scorpion scurries for cover. Pelicans and meadowlarks share the same airspace, and cattails and cactus grow within sight of each other. There's no place quite like it. □

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Ron Friez

Yellow-headed blackbirds are drawn to the marshy areas that irrigation projects have created in Washington's semi-desert regions.

